

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE



Enduring Questions
Institution: Boston College



NATIONAL
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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

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National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Education Programs

Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a grant application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. The excerpt does not include a budget or résumé.

Project Title: Enduring Questions Course on Evil

Institution: Boston College

Project Director: Alan Wolfe

Grant Program: Enduring Questions Course Grants

Evil

I propose to teach a course on “evil.” It will introduce students to classic texts from theology, moral philosophy, and literature and then apply those texts to contemporary examples of terrorism, genocide and ethnic cleansing. The course is designed to sharpen the ability of students to think seriously about one of the most enduring of questions, learn to cut through popular rhetoric about it, and reflect upon what is happening in the world around them.

So long as human beings have had the capacity to act, they from time to time act in bad ways; in this sense, evil can be said to be an omnipresent aspect of human existence. Still, contemporary Americans were reintroduced to the persistence of evil by the events of September 11, 2001. They saw completely innocent people killed. They began to hear about an “axis of evil.” They suddenly started paying attention to regimes that oppressed their own people or sought to swallow their neighbors. They debated whether their own country had engaged in torture and, if it did, whether in doing so it was adopting the tactics of the countries they were fighting.

As important as such discussions are, they frequently take place in the absence of a long history of thinking about evil that has marked the Western intellectual tradition. Four key turning points in that tradition will be examined in this course. The first is Christian theology, especially the writings of St. Augustine, which not only are crucial in their own right but helped stimulate such modern thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt. The second includes literary classics written by Shakespeare and Milton. The third is Enlightenment moral philosophy, especially in the writings of thinkers reflecting on the Lisbon Earthquake such as Voltaire, Kant, and Rousseau. And the

fourth are the works stimulated by the Holocaust, including those by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Stanley Milgram.

The kinds of questions the course will pose include the problem of theodicy, or how a good God could condone evil things. But it will also ask questions such as these: are human beings evil by nature or is evil something learned? Is there a capacity for evil inside all of us or should the term be reserved only for those who commit the most horrendous of atrocities? Can evil ever be described as “banal?” Is faith an antidote to evil or its accomplice? Is evil on the increase? What are the best ways to respond to evil when it occurs?

Having asked such questions as these, the course will turn to contemporary issues such as religiously-inspired terrorism in the Middle East, ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and Africa, and debates over the use of torture. The aim will be to judge whether the tools the Western tradition has given us for understanding evil still work or whether we need new ways of thinking about the problem, such as those offered by neuropsychology or sociobiology.

The course will be a seminar limited to 15 students, with permission of the instructor required. The seminar format will allow for maximum student participation, although I will take the leading role in framing the questions raised by each reading. Each student will be required to write a term paper selecting an example of evil in the modern world and applying the insights of the Western tradition to it. Although it will be difficult to finance a trip to, say, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, films such as “Schindler’s List” or “The Killing Fields” can be used and we can invite outside speakers

both from the academic community of Boston as well as from the Armenian and Jewish communities.

Here are the main readings for the course:

I: Classics in the Problem of Evil

Christian Theology

Augustine, *Confessions*

Augustine, *City of God*, Part I, Part IV, Part V

British Literature

Shakespeare, *Richard III* and *Othello*

Milton, *Paradise Lost*

The Enlightenment and After

Rousseau, *First and Second Discourse*

Kant, “On the Failure of Every Possible Attempt at Theodicy,” and “What is Enlightenment?”

Voltaire, *Candide*

Post-Holocaust Reflections

Primo Levi, “The Gray Zone.”

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

II: Twentieth Century Discussions of Evil

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

George W. Bush, “Axis of Evil” speech

III: Evil in the Contemporary World

Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*

Samantha Power, "*A Problem from Hell*"

Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*

Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side*

Two criteria were used in the selection of these readings. I have tried to select classic works that are fascinating in and of themselves so that students will find them a joy to read but at the same time pose broad questions about evil that transcend their particular plots and subject matter. And in the more contemporary material I have looked for books that, while dealing with specific subjects such as terrorism and genocide, are clearly informed by a literary and philosophical consciousness and avoid trendy academic terms such as rational choice theory or behavioral economics.

As far as my own qualifications are concerned, I have become increasingly interested in moral and political theory since writing more empirically-inclined books such as *One Nation, After All* and *The Transformation of American Religion*. My next book, *The Future of Liberalism*, which will be published by Alfred Knopf in February 2009, examines the writings of such political philosophers as Locke, Mill, and Dewey to deal with such contemporary issues as immigration, affirmative action, and religious freedom.

In the course of writing this book I became increasingly interested in illiberal political and religious movements such as those represented by terrorism and ethnic cleansing. Not well read on the subject, I have been subjecting myself to a crash course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crises in Rwanda and Darfur. The theme of evil

runs throughout nearly all contemporary discussions of these issues, but it has not been clear to me that those who write about the subjects, especially those trained in political science and international relations, have read widely enough in theology and moral philosophy to address the problem of evil adequately.

Nearly all the books I write develop out of the courses I teach. Not only do I hope that a course such as this will benefit students, teaching it will benefit me. I plan to write a book about the problem of political evil, which I define as actions taken by elites to realize a particular conception of the good life by engaging in deliberately violent actions against large numbers of innocent people. While this book will deal primarily with examples of political evil in the modern world, it will be informed by the background reading I have been doing in theology and philosophy that will inform the proposed course. Some of the books that I will use in preparing for the course include Charles Mathews, *Evil and the Augustian Tradition*, Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, and Susan Nieman, *Moral Clarity*.

Boston College provides thorough ways to evaluate the success of courses through an extensive process of student review. I am also in touch with many of my previous students who write me and let me know what they are doing and thinking, and I expect the same would be true in the case of this proposed course.

Bibliography

In addition to all the books and essays mentioned in the narrative, I plan to read or reflect on the following works:

The Bible, especially the books of “Jonah” and ”Joshua” and the Gospels

The Koran, selections

Amery, Jean, *At the Mind's Limit*

Applebaum, Ann, *Gulag: A History*

Berman, Paul, *Terror and Liberalism*

Bernstein, Richard, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*

Bloom, Harold, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

Conrad, Joseph, *The Secret Agent*

Delbanco, Andrew, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Possessed*

Fish, Stanley, *How Milton Works*

Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*

Frum, David and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil*

Gourevitch, Philip, *We Wish to Inform You that We Will be Killed With our Families*

Hauerwas, Stanley, *Dispatches from the Front*

Hoffman, Bruce, *Inside Terrorism*

Hunt, Lynn, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*

Judt, Tony, *Reappraisals*

Kennedy, David, *The Dark Side of Virtue*

Leibnitz, Gottfried Wilhelm, *Theodicy*

Levi, Bernard-Henri, *Left in Dark Times*

Levi, Primo, *Survival in Auschwitz*

Levitt, Matthew, *Hamas*

Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*

Makiya, Kanan, *Republic of Fear*

Mann, Michael, *The Dark Side of Humanity*

Mayer, Arno, *Ploughshares into Swords*

Melville, Herman, *Billy Budd*

Mendelsohn, Daniel, *The Lost*

Montefiore, Simon Sebag, *Young Stalin*

Naimark, Norman, *Fires of Hatred*

Neiman, Susan, *Evil in Modern Thought*

Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Pagels, Elaine, *The Invention of Satan*

Plantinga, Alvin, *God, Freedom, Evil*

Quth, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*

Rosenblum, Ron, *Explaining Hitler*

Scoblic, J. Peter, *Us Versus Them*

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Updike, John, *Terrorist*

Weisel, Elie, *Night*

Wright, N.T., *Evil and the Justice of God*

Zombardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect*